

THE BLACK BOX

E. Phillips Oppenheim

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(Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.)

Sanford Quest, master criminologist of the world, finds that in bringing to justice Macdonald, the murderer of Lord Ashleigh's daughter, he has but just arrested a life-and-death struggle with a mysterious master criminal. In a hidden but in Prof. Ashleigh's garden he has seen an anthropoid ape skeleton and a living inhuman creature, half monkey, half man, destroyed by fire. In his rooms at intervals have appeared from nowhere two black boxes with sarcasms and threatening notes signed with a pair of armless, threatening hands, representing those which have already figured in a diamond robbery. With his secretary, Laura, and his assistant, Lenora, he follows the trail of Macdonald, who escaped on his way to prison, and finds Macdonald's dead body in a cave on a lonely hillside. After a thrilling escape from two thugs who try to kill him he returns to his rooms to find his valet, Roger Brown, and a Miss Quigg murdered. Police Inspector French investigating, French, puzzled, half suspects Quest of the crime.

FIFTH INSTALLMENT. ON THE RACK.

CHAPTER XII.

FOR the moment a new element had been introduced into the horror of the little tableau. All eyes were fixed upon Quest, who had listened to the inspector's dubious words with a supercilious smile upon his lips.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you would like to ask me a few questions?" "Perhaps I may feel it my duty to do so," the inspector replied gravely. "In the first place, then, Mr. Quest, will you kindly explain the condition of your clothes?" Quest looked down at himself quickly. More than ever he realized the significance of his disheveled appearance.

"I traveled from number ten tower, just outside New York, on top of a freight car," he said grimly. "It wasn't a very comfortable ride."

"Perhaps you will explain what made you take it, then?" the inspector continued.

Quest shrugged his shoulders.

"I have a car, then," he replied.

"This morning I decided to make an attempt to clear up the mystery of Macdonald's disappearance. I sent on my secretary, Miss Laura, and my friends with the section bugs and Lenora and I went out by automobile."

"A little later, we instituted a search on a new principle, and before very long we found Macdonald's body. That's one up against you, I think, inspector."

"Very good," the inspector observed. "Go on, please."

"I left the two young ladies, at Miss Lenora's wish, to superintend the removal of the body. I myself had no engagement to deliver over her jewels to Mrs. Rheinholdt here at midday. I returned to the city and was attacked by two thugs near the section house. I got away from them, ran to the freight car, and was followed by the freight, was followed by the thugs, and jumped out on the last car from the freight car."

"There was a dead silence. Quest began quietly to dust his clothes. The inspector stopped him.

"Don't do that," he said.

Quest paused in his task and laid down the brush.

"Any more questions?"

"Where is your automobile?"

"No idea," Quest replied. "I left it in the road. When I jumped from the freight car I took it to the professor's garage and called for him, as arranged."

"That is perfectly true," the professor intervened. "Mr. Quest, for us, as arranged previously, at ten minutes to twelve."

The inspector nodded.

"I shall have to ask you to excuse me for a moment," he said. "While I ring up number ten signal tower. If Mr. Quest's story requires confirmation on the matter is at an end. Where said I find a telephone?"

"In every room in the house," Quest answered shortly. "There is one outside in the passage."

The inspector left the room almost immediately. The operator at number ten listened to Quest's side. A kindly smile parted his lips.

"My dear Mr. Quest," he exclaimed, "our friend the inspector has been turned a little, beyond a doubt, by these horrible happenings. Permit me to assure you that I look upon your insinuations as absurd."

"The man has gone off his head," Laura declared angrily.

"It will be all right directly he comes back," Lenora whispered, laying her hand upon Quest's arm.

"If only some one would give me my jewels and let me go," Mrs. Rheinholdt moaned.

The door opened and the inspector reappeared. He was looking graver than ever.

"Quest," he announced, "your alibi is useless. In fact, a little worse than useless. The operator at number ten has been found murdered at the back of the tower."

"I ought not to have left him to those thugs," he murmured regretfully.

"There is no automobile of yours in the vicinity," the inspector continued, "nor any news of it. I think it will be as well now, Quest, for this matter to take its obvious course. Will you, first of all, hand over her jewels to Mrs. Rheinholdt?"

Quest drew the keys of the safe from his pocket, crossed the room and unlocked the safe door. For a moment afterward he stood transfixed. His arm, half outstretched, remained motionless. Then he turned slowly around.

"The jewels have been stolen," he announced with unnatural calm.

Mrs. Rheinholdt pushed her way forward, wringing her hands.

"Stolen again?" she cried. "Mr. Quest, Inspector?"

"They were there," Quest declared. "When I left the house this morning. It seems probable," he added, "that the same person who is responsible for the double tragedy has also taken the jewels."

The inspector laid his hand heavily upon Quest's shoulder.

"It does seem as though that might be so," he assented grimly. "You will kindly consider yourself under a great deal of stress, Quest. Ladies and gentlemen, will you clear the room now, if you please? The ambulance I telephoned for is outside."

The professor, who had been looking as though dazed, suddenly intervened.

"Mr. French," he said earnestly, "I am convinced that you are making a great mistake. In arresting and taking away Mr. Quest you are removing from the one man who is likely to be able to clear up this mystery."

The inspector pushed him gently to one side.

"I can't excuse me, professor," he said. "But this is no matter for argument. If Mr. Quest can clear himself, no one will be more glad than I."

Quest shrugged his shoulders.

"The inspector will have his little joke," he observed dryly. "It's all right. Keep cool, he went on, as he saw the tears in Lenora's eyes. "Come round and see me in the Tomba, one of the rooms in the prison."

"If I can be of any assistance," the professor exclaimed, "I trust that you will not fail to call upon me. Mr. Quest, I repeat, inspector, he added, "I am convinced that you are making a very grave mistake. Mrs. Rheinholdt, you must let me take you home."

"She gave him her arm."

"My jewels!" she sobbed. "Just as they had been recovered, too!"

"The lady," the professor reminded her, with a faint air of reproach in his tone, "I think we must remember that we are in the presence of a grave tragedy, and the loss of a few jewels."

The ambulance men came and departed with their grim burden. The room on the ground floor was locked and sealed, and the house was soon empty except for the two girls. Toward six o'clock Lenora went out and returned with a newspaper. She opened it out upon the table and they both pored over it.

"WELL-KNOWN CRIMINOLOGIST ARRESTED FOR DOUBLE TRAGEDY."

Sanford Quest, the famous New York criminologist, was arrested at noon today, charged with the murder of his valet, Roger Brown, and Miss Quigg, Salvation Army canvasser. The crime seems to be mixed up in some mysterious fashion with others. John D. Martin, of signal tower No. 10, offered by Quest as an alibi, was found dead behind his tower. Quest claimed that he traveled from the signal tower to New York on a freight train, leaving his automobile behind, but neither machine nor chauffeur have been discovered.

Considerable Thorne has refused to consider him.

"He's a guy, that Justice Thorne, and so the idiot who wrote this stuff!"

Laura exclaimed, thrusting the paper away from her. "I guess the professor was dead right when he told French he was looking up the one man who could clear up the whole show."

Lenora nodded thoughtfully.

"The professor spoke up like a man," she agreed. "But Laura, I want to ask you something. Did you notice his servant—that man Craig?"

"Can't say I did particularly," Laura admitted.

"Twice," Lenora continued. "I thought he was going to faint. I tell you he was scared the whole of the time."

"What are you getting at, kid?" Laura demanded.

"At Craig, if I can," Lenora replied, moving toward the telephone. "Please give me the photographer's name. I am going to talk to the professor."

Laura adjusted the mirror to the instrument, and Lenora rang up. The professor himself answered the call.

"Have you seen the 3 o'clock edition?" Lenora asked.

"I will," the professor replied, young lady, the professor replied.

"Let me tell you what they say about Mr. Quest?"

Lenora commenced a rambling account of what she had read in the newspaper. All the time the eyes of the two girls were fixed upon the mirror. They could see the professor seated in his chair with two huge volumes by his side, a pile of manuscript, and catch the look of sympathy on his face as he listened attentively. Suddenly Lenora almost broke off. She gripped Laura by the shoulder.

"Study had been opened slowly, and Craig, carrying a bundle, paused for a moment on the threshold. He glanced nervously toward the professor, who seemed unaware of his entrance. Then he moved stealthily toward the fireplace, stooped down, and committed something to the flames. The relief on his face, as he stood up, was obvious."

All I can do for Mr. Quest, young lady, I will do. The professor promised. "If you will forgive my saying so, you are a little overexcited just now. Take my advice and rest for a short time. Call round and see me whenever you wish."

He laid the receiver down and the reflection on the mirror faded away. Lenora looked up at her sister, sitting on her coat and hat, which were still lying on the chair.

"I am going right down to the professor's," she said.

"What do you think you can do there?" Laura asked.

"I am going to see if I can find out what the professor has been doing. I will be back in an hour."

Laura walked with her as far as the front door, and then afterward the professor's front door. Craig admitted her almost at once. For a moment he seemed to stare at her, and then he bowed and led her into the study.

The weakness, however, was only momentary. He showed her into the study, which was still immersed in his work. He greeted her kindly, and with a little sigh laid down his pen.

"Well, my lady," he said, "have you thought of something I can do?"

"You took no notice of the chair to which he pointed, and rested her hand upon his shoulder."

"Professor," she begged, "do and see Mr. Quest. He is in the Tomba prison, and the kindest thing any one could possibly do."

The professor glanced regretfully at his manuscript, but he did not hesitate. He strode to the door and unlocked it. "If you think he would appreciate it, I will go at once," he decided.

"That face shows with gratitude."

"That is really kind of you, professor," she declared.

"I will send for my coat and we will go together, if you like," he suggested.

"I am going the other way, back to Georgia square," she explained. "No, please, don't ring. I can find my way out."

She hurried from the room. Outside in the hall she paused for a moment, listening with beating heart. By the side wall was a hat rack with branching pegs, from which several coats and a long fur stole were hanging. She crossed her shelter. Presently the professor came out of the room.

"My coat, please, Craig," she heard him say.

Her heart sank. Craig was coming in her direction. Her discovery seemed certain. She, as his hand was half stretched out to remove one of the garments, she heard the professor's voice.

"I think I shall walk, Craig. I have been so much upset today that the exercise will do me good. I will have the light coat from my bed room."

For a moment the shock of relief was so great that she almost lost consciousness. A moment or two later she heard the professor leave the house. Very cautiously she stole out from her hiding place. The hall was empty. She crossed it with noiseless footsteps, slipped into the study and moved stealthily to the door.

There was a little heap of ashes in one distinct spot. She gathered them up in her handkerchief and secreted it in

her dress. Then she moved hurriedly toward the door and stepped quickly behind the curtain. She stood there listening intently. Craig was doing something in the hall. Even while she was hesitating the door was opened. He came in and moved toward his master's table. Through a chink in the curtain she could see that he was stooping down, collecting some letters. She stole out, ran down the hall, opened the front door, and hastened down the avenue. Her heart was beating quickly. The front door handle had slipped from her fingers, and it seemed to her that she could hear even now the slam with which it had swung to. At the gates she looked back. There were no signs of life. The house still bore its customary appearance, gloomy and deserted. With a sigh of relief, she hailed a taxicab and sank back into the corner.

She found Laura waiting for her, and a few minutes afterward the two girls were examining the ashes with the aid of Quest's microscope. Among the little pile was one fragment at the sight of which they both exclaimed. It was distinctly a shred of charred muslin embroidery. Lenora pointed toward it triumphantly.

"That's that evidence!" she demanded. "Let's ring up Inspector French!"

Laura shook her head doubtfully.

"Not so fast," she advised. "French is a good sort, but he's not a detective. He's just now against the boss. I'm not sure that this evidence would go far for itself."

"It's evidence enough for us to go to Craig, though. What we have got to do is to get a confession out of him, somehow."

Laura studied her companion, for a moment, curiously.

"Taking some interest in Mr. Quest, kid, all right," she said. "But he's not looking for trouble of his own kind. He's just now against the boss. I'm not sure that this evidence would go far for itself."

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